

Hundreds Protest Cuts in Water in California



Mark Crosse/Fresno Bee

Marchers on Tuesday on Highway 33 in the Central Valley of California demanded more water.

FIREBAUGH, Calif. — Hundreds of farmers, farm workers and local elected officials walked along dusty roads in the Central Valley on Thursday, part of a four-day march to protest federal cutbacks in water supplies.

“No Water, No Jobs, No Food,” read one sign held above the crowd, expressing the frustration of many in a region battered by a three-year drought, the national recession and surging unemployment.

“This is ground zero,” said Mario Santoyo, an adviser to the California Latino Water Coalition, which organized the 30-mile hike. “There’s a human tragedy going on here, and we need water.”

The march, the largest of several held this year, will end Friday at the San Luis Reservoir, one of many in the area that are well below normal levels.

With below-normal precipitation, many in the Central Valley have let their fields go fallow this spring. In March, the state projected that because of the drought as many as 23,700 full-time workers would go without jobs, and farmers would lose up to \$477 million in revenue.

The marchers started their trek on Tuesday in the hard-hit town of Mendota, which has an unemployment rate of 40 percent.

Organizers are calling for a new canal that would divert water from the Sacramento River to Central Valley farms as well as a relaxation of the environmental protections given to threatened species like the delta smelt, a pinky-sized fish native to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, a critical aquatic byway for water from the wetter north part of the state.

Court rulings have limited pumping from the delta, while the drought has eliminated all federal water allocations to farms south of the delta for this growing season.

Still, some labor organizers and advocates for rural areas contend that the marchers' goals reflect only the desires of agribusiness and not the real needs of farm workers.

Many of the protesters were paid by their employers to march in lieu of harvesting crops.

"In reality, this is not a farm worker march," said Arturo Rodriguez, president of the United Farm Workers of America, the 27,000-member union founded by César Chávez, which did not participate in the march. "This is a farmer march orchestrated and financed by growers."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican who is expected to address the crowd Friday, said in a statement on Thursday, "This march is about so much more than politics and water policy. It's about our jobs, our schools, our families, our environment."

Patricia Lopez, a 38-year-old farm hand, carried a sign made by her 7-year-old son with a smiley face under the word "water" and a sad face under "no water."

"My legs are tired," Ms. Lopez said. "But this is my job, and more water will make more work."